

# Bill Lee (Tennessee politician)

**William Byron Lee** (born October 9, 1959)<sup>[1]</sup> is an American businessman and politician serving as the 50th and current governor of Tennessee.<sup>[2]</sup> Elected in 2018, Lee campaigned as a business-oriented member of the Republican Party.<sup>[3]</sup> Before entering politics he held various positions at the Lee Company, an inherited family business; he was the company's president and CEO from 1992 to 2016.<sup>[4]</sup>

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## Early life and career

Lee was raised on his family's 1,000-acre (400 ha) cattle farm started by his grandparents in Franklin, Tennessee, the Triple L Ranch; the family raises Hereford cattle.<sup>[5][6]</sup> He is a seventh-generation Tennessean.<sup>[7]</sup>

After graduating from Franklin High School in his hometown,<sup>[8]</sup> Lee entered Auburn University in Auburn, Alabama in 1977 and graduated in 1981<sup>[9]</sup> with a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering.<sup>[5]</sup> In college, Lee was a member of the Kappa Alpha Order.

Lee was named president and CEO of his family's home-services and construction company, Lee Company, holding the position from 1992 until 2016.<sup>[5][10]</sup> He briefly served as chairman.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Governor of Tennessee

**Bill Lee**



Lee in 2019

**50th Governor of Tennessee**

**Incumbent**

**Assumed office**

January 19, 2019

**Lieutenant**

Randy McNally

**Preceded by**

Bill Haslam

**Personal details**

**Born**

October 9, 1959

Franklin, Tennessee, U.S.

**Political party**

Republican

**Spouse(s)**

Carol Ann Lee (m. 1984; died 2000)

Maria Lee (m. 2008)

**Children**

4

**Residence**

Governor's Mansion

**Education**

Auburn University (BS)

## 2018 election

In April 2017 Lee announced his candidacy the 2018 election for governor of Tennessee.<sup>[10]</sup> A self-described social conservative, Lee also targeted pro-business Republicans.<sup>[10]</sup> In the Republican primary election, he ran against Congresswoman Diane Black, Knoxville businessman and former Tennessee Economic and Development Commissioner Randy Boyd, and state House speaker Beth Harwell.<sup>[10][11]</sup> Originally considered a longshot, Lee rose in the polls as Boyd and Black launched negative advertising against each other.<sup>[2][12]</sup> He won the August 2 primary with 291,414 votes (36.8%) to Boyd's 193,054 (24.3%), Black's 182,457 (23.0%), and Harwell's 121,484 (15.3%).<sup>[13]</sup>

Lee defeated the Democratic nominee, former Nashville mayor Karl Dean, in the November 6 general election,<sup>[14]</sup> receiving 1,336,106 votes (59.5%) to Dean's 864,863 (38.5%).<sup>[15]</sup>

Lee previously chaired and served on the committee of the Tennessee Prayer Breakfast.<sup>[16]</sup>

## Tenure

### 2019

Lee was sworn in on January 19, 2019.<sup>[2]</sup> He issued five executive orders in his first two months in office; one addressed economically distressed rural counties in Tennessee, another addressed nondiscrimination in employment, and a third imposed a 90-day "freeze" on the issuance of new regulations by executive departments.<sup>[17]</sup> Lee announced that the governor's website would include a new feature to allow citizens to give feedback on bills that had passed through the General Assembly and were awaiting his signature or veto.<sup>[18]</sup>

As governor, Lee has rejected proposals to expand TennCare, the state's Medicaid program.<sup>[19]</sup> He supports legislation introduced in the Tennessee General Assembly to ban abortion as early as six weeks into pregnancy, in potential conflict with the Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade*.<sup>[20]</sup> In February 2019 Lee announced that his budget proposal for the 2020 fiscal year would include a repeal of the 10% amusement tax Tennessee levies on gyms, fitness centers, and health clubs. Lee argued that the tax discourages Tennesseans from being physically active. If enacted, the repeal would reduce state revenues by around \$10 million.<sup>[21]</sup>



Governor Bill Lee taking the oath of office.

On March 4, Lee delivered his first State of the State address to the Tennessee General Assembly, talking about his plans for the future and how he believed that "Tennessee can and should lead the nation."<sup>[22]</sup> On March 7, Lee delivered a "state of West Tennessee" address at the University of Memphis. He is the first governor make a speech directed toward only West Tennessee; in the speech, he proposed creating more charter schools and that the state use \$25 million to help traditional public schools when they lose students.<sup>[23]</sup> On April 4, Lee announced that the state would temporarily reinstate paper-based assessments for students taking the TNReady test, an annual statewide assessment, during the 2019–20 school year.<sup>[24]</sup>

On May 24, Lee signed into law a school voucher program that provides public funds to families so they can send their kids to private schools, effective at the beginning of the 2020–21 fiscal year,<sup>[25]</sup> but this program was later ruled unconstitutional.<sup>[26]</sup> On July 2, Lee signed into law House Bill 1158, a school safety bill that calls for school districts across the state to establish a threat assessment team.<sup>[27]</sup> On July 17 he visited Lauderdale County in West Tennessee to see how recent flooding from the remnants of Hurricane Barry had affected the community.<sup>[28]</sup>

On July 7, Lee signed an order proclaiming Nathan Bedford Forrest Day, as required by Tennessee law, celebrating an early leader of the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>[29]</sup>

On November 26, Lee and Comcast announced a \$2.4 million fiber network expansion that will bring high-speed broadband internet connection to Tipton County in West Tennessee.<sup>[30]</sup> On December 1, Lee proclaimed the first of December as Rosa Parks Day, which was the day that Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955.<sup>[31]</sup> In early December 2019, Lee visited several high schools and colleges in East Tennessee to promote the GIVE program, which prioritizes learning opportunities in rural counties and enhances career and technical education statewide.<sup>[32]</sup>

On December 10, Lee appointed Kyle Hixson to serve as a criminal court judge for the 6th judicial district, filling the spot of Bob McGee.<sup>[33]</sup> On December 13, Lee announced that the global industrial company Hyosung Heavy Industries would invest \$86.9 million and develop 410 jobs over the next seven years in Memphis.<sup>[34]</sup> On December 18, he announced that Tennessee would continue to accept refugees, and in a letter to Lieutenant Governor Randy McNally and Speaker of the Tennessee House of Representatives Cameron Sexton wrote, "it is important to note that each and every refugee that might potentially be resettled in Tennessee under the President's Executive Order will have been individually approved by the Trump Administration for legal immigrant status."<sup>[35]</sup>

On December 19, Vanderbilt University released a poll of Tennesseans over the fall of 2019 that showed Lee's approval rating at 62%, the highest of any statewide politician.<sup>[36]</sup> On December 26, Lee appointed former state senator Mae Beavers to serve a six-year term on the state Board of Parole.<sup>[37]</sup>

## 2020

On January 3, 2020, Lee visited Elizabethton to announce a \$1 million grant to the Elizabethton TCAT. During his trip, he was met with protests from people who disagreed with Lee's decision to continue resettling refugees in the state. One protester, Elizabeth Cox, said, "We have homeless and veterans that are sleeping under boxcars and under bridges and freezing to death. We don't need to look out for foreigners first."<sup>[38]</sup> On January 7 Lee signed an executive order that offered state employees three months' paid leave for new parents and caregivers of sick relatives. He described it as "one of the most cost-effective investments in the families of our state employees in recent history". The order is to go into effect on March 1.<sup>[39]</sup>

On January 14, Lee announced that he would sign a measure into law that assures continued taxpayer funding of faith-based foster care and adoption agencies even if they exclude LGBT families and others based on religious beliefs. Supporters of the measure argued that such measures are needed to protect against potential lawsuits hostile to the group's religious beliefs.<sup>[40]</sup> In response to this legislation, Amazon, which announced in July 2019 that it would bring 5,000 jobs to Nashville, stated, "Amazon does not support this legislation. We have a long history of supporting equality and we're opposed to laws that discriminate or encourage discrimination."<sup>[41]</sup> To explain why he signed the bill, Lee said, "I

think equality is important and protection of rights is important and the rights of religious liberty are important. And that bill was centered around protection of religious liberty and that's why I signed it."<sup>[42]</sup> Lee signed the measure on January 24.<sup>[43]</sup>

On January 23, Lee proposed a "heartbeat bill", which would ban abortion when a fetal heartbeat is detected, similar to legislation that has been blocked in other states. He said the bill was "a monumental step forward in celebrating, cherishing and defending life." Tennessee Democratic Party Chair Mary Mancini responded, "No politician should be in the middle of the decision to end a pregnancy, choose adoption, or raise a child."<sup>[44]</sup><sup>[45]</sup>

On February 3, Lee delivered his second annual State of the State address. In the address, he outlined his vision for the state, which included creating a \$250 million endowment to address mental health in K-12 education and extending TennCare to pregnant women who need dental care. Lee also proposed a \$117 million investment to increase teacher salaries.<sup>[46]</sup><sup>[47]</sup> On February 13, Lee delivered his second annual "state of West Tennessee" address at Lane College in Jackson, Tennessee. In the address, he proposed investing \$70 million to equip teachers with professional development, materials and other tools to help increase the state's literacy rate.<sup>[48]</sup>

On February 19, Lee denied clemency for death row inmate Nicholas Sutton.<sup>[49]</sup> Sutton had saved three corrections officers' lives.<sup>[50]</sup> Lee's statement read: "After careful consideration of Nicholas Sutton's request for clemency and a thorough review of the case, I am upholding the sentence of the State of Tennessee and will not be intervening."<sup>[51]</sup> Sutton was the third person to be put to death under Lee's tenure as governor. On February 22, Lee signed a bill making Tennessee's official nickname the "Volunteer State." The name originated during the War of 1812, when Tennessee sent 1,500 volunteer soldiers.<sup>[52]</sup>

On February 27, Lee announced his support for permitless carry legislation, which would allow lawful gun owners 21 and older to carry a firearm without a permit. He said, "This legislation is about increasing freedom for law-abiding citizens and implementing harsher penalties for criminals. With the freedom and liberties granted to us in the Second Amendment also comes a great responsibility to steward them wisely and protect our citizens." Many people opposed this legislation, including some Second Amendment supporters.<sup>[53]</sup>

On the night of March 2 and the morning of March 3, a series of tornadoes touched down across Tennessee, killing 25 people and injuring 150. On March 3, Lee said, "It's heartbreaking. We've had loss of life across the state." Of the recovery effort, he said, "We're doing everything that we can to respond to this. With that being said, this is a very difficult situation." Later that day, Lee surveyed the damage in Nashville, visiting Germantown and Tennessee State University.<sup>[54]</sup> He also surveyed the damage in Cookeville with President Donald Trump on March 6, where he thanked Trump and FEMA for their response to the tornado outbreak.<sup>[55]</sup>



Governor Lee (far right) tours a tornado ravaged neighborhood in Cookeville with President Trump

On March 5, Lee announced that a 44-year-old Williamson County resident tested positive for COVID-19, marking the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Tennessee.<sup>[56]</sup> In response to the growing number of COVID-19 cases, Lee issued Executive Order No. 14 on March 12, declaring a state of emergency in Tennessee until May 11 to "facilitate the treatment and containment of COVID-19."<sup>[57]</sup> As the number of positive cases grew, he

urged school districts to close through March to prevent the further spread of the disease.<sup>[58]</sup> On March 17, he announced plans to expand remote COVID-19 testing sites across the state, saying, "We do not want anyone in the state who has a need to be tested...to be turned away for any reason."<sup>[59][60]</sup>

On April 2, Lee issued a stay-at-home mandate until April 14. On April 13, he extended the mandate to the end of the month.<sup>[61][62]</sup> On April 15, as the number of COVID-19 cases continued to grow, Lee asked all school districts to remain closed for the remainder of the school year.<sup>[63]</sup> On April 28, he signed an executive order allowing gyms in 89 out of 95 counties to open on May 1.<sup>[64]</sup>

Following the Killing of George Floyd while he was in custody in Minneapolis, Lee condemned the officers that were involved, saying that "...police brutality is not law enforcement."<sup>[65]</sup> On May 30, the "I will breathe" protest was held in Nashville, which advocated against the death of George Floyd. During the protest, a man set fire to the Davidson County Courthouse, however the building was not severely damaged.<sup>[66]</sup> In response to the protest, Lee authorized the National Guard to mobilize in Nashville, adding that the protests had taken "...a violent, unlawful turn..."<sup>[67]</sup>

On August 20, Lee signed into law a bill increasing the severity of penalties for a number of protest-related offenses. Most notably, it reclassifies camping in a tent outside the state capitol from a misdemeanor to a felony offense punishable by up to six years in prison. This reclassification means that anyone convicted of the act will also lose their right to vote, as convicted felons in Tennessee are subject to disfranchisement.<sup>[68]</sup>

In September 2020, Lee supported a Tennessee delegation that traveled to Beijing to enhance trade and economic linkages between the state and the People's Republic of China.<sup>[69]</sup>

## Political views

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Lee identifies as a social conservative.<sup>[10]</sup> He identifies as pro-life, opposing abortion rights.<sup>[70]</sup> He supports allowing organizations to exclude same-sex married couples from adopting children.<sup>[71]</sup> He believes that vouchers are the most effective means to improve educational opportunities for low-income students and supports charter schools.<sup>[72]</sup> He also supports the expansion of vocational, technical, and agricultural educational programs in public schools.<sup>[70]</sup> Lee opposes the expansion of TennCare allowed by the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act.<sup>[70]</sup> He supports work requirements for TennCare eligibility.<sup>[72]</sup> Lee has said that he believes that partnering with nonprofit organizations is the most effective method to reduce recidivism for criminals.<sup>[70]</sup> He has expressed skepticism about using incentives to bring jobs to Tennessee, saying that low taxes and a business-friendly environment are better options.<sup>[70]</sup> Lee opposes allowing in-state college tuition for illegal immigrants brought to the United States as children, and opposes sanctuary cities.<sup>[70]</sup> He supports efforts to expand broadband to rural areas.<sup>[70]</sup>

## Personal life

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Lee lives in Fernvale with his second wife, Maria, whom he married in October 2008.<sup>[73]</sup> His first wife, Carol Ann, died in 2000 in a horseback riding accident.<sup>[74]</sup> After her death, Lee took extended time off from his construction company to raise his four children.<sup>[5]</sup>

Lee attends Grace Chapel Church in Leiper's Fork.<sup>[10]</sup>



Lee previously served as a member of the board of trustees of Belmont University, chairman of the YMCA of Middle Tennessee, president of the Associated Builders and Contractors, and a board member of the Hope Clinic for Women and the Men of Valor Prison Ministry.<sup>[5]</sup>

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# External links

- [Official governor website \(https://www.tn.gov/governor/\)](https://www.tn.gov/governor/)
- [Campaign website \(https://www.billlee.com/\)](https://www.billlee.com/)
- [Appearances \(https://www.c-span.org/person/?billlee04\)](https://www.c-span.org/person/?billlee04) on [C-SPAN](#)

Party political offices		
Preceded by <b><u>Bill Haslam</u></b>	<b><u>Republican nominee for Governor of Tennessee</u></b> 2018	Most recent
Political offices		
Preceded by <b><u>Bill Haslam</u></b>	<b><u>Governor of Tennessee</u></b> 2019–present	Incumbent
U.S. order of precedence (ceremonial)		
Preceded by <b><u>Mike Pence</u></b> <i>as <u>Vice President</u></i>	<b><u>Order of Precedence of the United States</u></b> Within Tennessee	Succeeded by <b><u>Mayor of city</u></b> in which event is held
		Succeeded by <b><u>Otherwise Nancy Pelosi</u></b> <i>as <u>Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives</u></i>
Preceded by <b><u>Andy Beshear</u></b> <i>as <u>Governor of Kentucky</u></i>	<b><u>Order of Precedence of the United States</u></b> Outside Tennessee	Succeeded by <b><u>Mike DeWine</u></b> <i>as <u>Governor of Ohio</u></i>

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